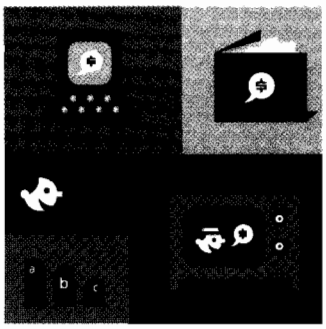
Netwatch

By Jim Carroll

Your guide to business & accounting on the Internet

Linux comes of age

We have four computer hubs, five network servers, three laptops and five PCs scattered throughout our house, not to mention at least four computer-network media devices that deliver music to various sound systems. That's what happens when you've worked at home for 17 years, your wife works at home and you have two pre-teen sons immersed in the digital age. All this technology pumps out thousands of family photos and songs, monitors e-mail for spam, converts TV shows into computer files to go and supports our busy digital family. For years, Linux has formed the core of this infrastructure, providing stability and reliability that supports both my business and digital lifestyle at an extremely reasonable cost. In 1998, I installed it for the first time armed with many manuals and books. Eventually, I got it working and my office and home infrastructure has grown with Linux forming the reliable core; it has since become far more sophisticated and easier to use.



Linux can play two roles in your home or office: as a worthy alternative to Windows XP or a Macintosh on the desktop and as a reliable tool to manage back-end office infrastructure.

Essentially, there are two distinct flavours of Linux: various server configurations that provide e-mail, Web, file sharing, printing and other tools and Linux "desktop" software, which is designed for use by regular human beings.

Let's start with the latter. I've been working with two Linux distributions — Xandros and Ubuntu. Both offer sophisticated easy-to-install versions for word processing, e-mail, Web surfing and just about anything you might do with Windows XP or a Mac. Both include versions of OpenOffice, open-source software that has emerged as a worthy alternative to Microsoft Office. When it comes to using Linux as an office server, choices multiply. You can find distributions named Mandrake, Debian and many more; in addition, Xandros and Ubuntu offer server versions that you could use at the hub of a small or medium-size office.

Both offer tools that ensure your software is up-to-date with the latest bug patches and security fixes. You can also browse a list of software tools that allow you to install an employee discussion board, mailing lists, Web server software or countless other tools. I've found one of the niftiest features to be the remote desktop software that lets me fix problems on a machine on the network simply by logging on to it.

It's easy to try either version: just download a file that lets you burn an installation CD or order a CD online. The installation takes about 10 minutes; you can choose to have Linux and Windows run together on the same machine. The only tricky part is assigning a part of your hard disk for Linux — make sure you use free space rather than replacing the entire contents of the drive.

For office server duties, I've settled on using Debian; various versions run on different machines. All my office documents are automatically backed up to various Linux servers. My e-mail is filtered and refiltered on one server, hitting a 99% accuracy rate in getting everything that matters to me. My sons store homework on a reserved Windows-like file area on one Linux server and can access it from any computer in the house.

There has been much debate in the media as to whether Linux will ever come of age. From my perspective, it already has.

Jim Carroll, FCA, is a well-known speaker, author and columnist. Reach him at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com or log on to his website at www.jimcarroll.com

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